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HUSD faces \$2.3 million in budget cuts

District considers slashing summer school, adult ed, school days

By Nathan Wright
Staff Writer

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Healdsburg school officials reviewed preliminary plans to slash \$2.3 million from the 2010-2011 budget last week, decisions that will likely mean less days of school and fewer programs next fall.

Healdsburg Unified School District leaders have until March 15 to notify teachers of potential layoffs, requiring staff to prepare preliminary budgets many months before the state will approve its own. Cuts being considered include the summer school program, adult education, instructional days and numerous teaching, staff and administrative positions.

"We spread the pain as much as we can," said HUSD superintendent Jeff Harding at the Feb. 17 meeting. "There are management reductions, staff reductions, teacher reductions. There's no single cut here that doesn't have negative impacts."

The district's ongoing financial woes stem from the state's fiscal crisis. According to the state Department of Education, California has cut \$18 billion from public education in the past two years. The continued cuts have left districts throughout the state with fewer and fewer options when deciding what programs and personnel can be saved and what can be sacrificed to balance the annual budget.

"You can't cut that kind of revenue from school district budgets and not impact our program," Harding said. "It's that simple. It hurts our staff, our students and our community. We'd be negligent to ignore that reality."

Teachers carry much of the burden in the preliminary budget plans. Declining enrollment and increases in class sizes will allow the district to save money by laying off teachers. The district can also save money by eliminating school days, but the \$52,000 savings for each less day comes out of the paychecks of all district employees.

Healdsburg High School teacher Brent Mortensen spoke before the school board and asked that they reject the plan. He reminded trustees that teachers spend long hours at school and pay for many expenses out of pocket. "Even though my union is asking me to reduce my salary, I'm asking you not to, because, quite frankly, I'm running out of money," he said. "We've been making these cuts every year for the past eight years."

While Mortensen asked that days not be cut from the school year, Harding said he wasn't aware of any district not considering doing so to balance next year's budget. "I don't know of a district in Sonoma County that isn't looking at reducing the calendar," he said. "It's all over the state. I never thought we'd get to the point where this would be commonplace in California. It's a travesty."

The budget talks shocked student trustee Nikkie Sayre, who asked why the state was taking away funding. "I don't understand why we have to do it," she said. "I don't see why we have to agree with it. Summer school and adult education, that's necessary. It's not something you can just take away."

Later at the meeting trustees voted unanimously to support a new piece of legislation that would make it easier for school districts to pass local parcel taxes.

An organization is currently collecting signatures to put the Local Control of Local Classrooms Funding Act on the November 2010 ballot, a proposition that would lower the required vote to pass a parcel tax election from 66.6 percent to 55 percent.

The 66.6 percent threshold—as required by Prop. 13—has hindered districts from passing new taxes for nearly three decades. According to the state's Ed Source website, only 54 percent of school parcel tax elections have passed from 1983 to June 2009. Had

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the threshold only been 55 percent, 87 percent would have passed.

California voters passed similar legislation in 2000 when state superintendent Jack O'Connell spearheaded a successful proposition that lowered the threshold for school bond elections from 66.6 percent to 55 percent.

The district plans to go out for a parcel tax in the future but is now waiting to see if the Local Control of Local Classrooms Funding Act passes first.

The district is holding a special board meeting at 5 p.m. on Wednesday, March 3 to discuss staffing issues for the 2010-2011 school year. For information on the budget or the upcoming meeting visit www.husd.com.

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